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RUCPDOG/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC
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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: ENERGY SECRETARY BODMAN WARMLY COVERED IN
WESTERN/LOCAL PRESS, LESS SO IN RUSSIAN PRESS.

REF: Ashgabat 1188

11. (SBU) SUMMARY. U.S. Secretary of Energy Samuel Bodman's November 14-15 visit to Turkmenistan received broad coverage in both state and international media. Bodman's remarks at Turkmenistan's International Oil and Gas Exhibition conference (TIOGE), and his meetings with Turkmenistan's president Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov received wide and generally accurate coverage. Secretary Bodman's press conference also received generally good news coverage both locally and abroad. In a break from the past, a relatively large number of foreign correspondents attended the press conference, as well as Turkmenistan's state news media. Some Russian news outlets again spun an image of the United States competing with Russia for Central Asia's natural resources. PDAS Steven Mann also received favorable coverage at TIOGE. END SUMMARY.

ACCURATE COVERAGE OF SECRETARY BODMAN'S TIOGE SPEECH

12. (U) Press coverage from Secretary of Energy Samuel Bodman's November 14-15 visit to Turkmenistan was broad and favorable. From November 15-19, Reuters, Agence France Presse, Interfax, ITAR-TASS articles on the TIOGE conference carried accurate quotes from Bodman's official conference speech about the need for transparent, stable and market-oriented legal and tax systems in Turkmenistan to attract world-class companies and about improved opportunities in energy cooperation with Turkmenistan. The news agencies highlighted Bodman's quote that the United States was ready to become a long-term partner of Turkmenistan. November 15 evening state "Watan" TV news program (Turkmen) carried a video report showcasing Bodman giving remarks at the conference, which included accurate excerpts. The news broadcast also highlighted Bodman's meeting with government officials of Turkmenistan.

AS USUAL: MEETING WITH THE PRESIDENT HIGHLIGHTED

13. (U) On November 15, state "Watan" TV news program (Turkmen)

highlighted Bodman's meeting with President Berdimuhamedov and also noted Secretary Bodman's remarks about U.S. business circles interested in establishing fruitful contacts with Turkmenistan. Following video and narrative of the meeting, the broadcast included a mostly accurate Turkmen translation of the Secretary's post meeting remarks with only minor, stylistic differences. The following day, state dailies "Neutral Turkmenistan" (Russian, circ. 39,651) and "Turkmenistan" (Turkmen, circ. 29,091) carried front-page articles about the meeting, with content similar to the "Watan" broadcast. In subsequent days, other government print and internet outlets carried the same story. Russian news agencies Interfax (Russian, English) and ITAR-TASS (Russian, English) also accurately highlighted the meeting in their news reports.

A REMARKABLE PRESS CONFERENCE -- BY TURKMENISTAN'S STANDARDS

¶4. (SBU) For the first time in recent history, Turkmenistan's state news media - multiple representatives of state media - attended a U.S. Embassy hosted press conference, along with their local stringer and foreign correspondent counterparts. It was also clearly evident that in contrast to past practice, the state news outlets were operating independently of each other, as encouraged by President Berdimuhamedov in reftel. "Turkmenistan TV" missed Secretary Bodman's press conference and desperately pleaded with PAO

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for an interview with the Secretary during the remainder of the day, because they were not able to borrow video from their colleagues at the "Altyn Asyr" or "Yaslyk" channels. Another surprise happened at the press conference when a journalist for Turkmen State Press Service asked a question about prospects for U.S. cooperation in developing the country's energy sector. (COMMENT: NOT a question about the Ruhnama or the Secretary's impressions of Ashgabat, "the white marble city," which could very well have been the case just a few months ago. END COMMENT.) This kind of active participation by

ASHGABAT 00001269 002 OF 003

Turkmenistan's news media was itself unprecedented.

¶5. (U) State "Watan" TV news program's November 15 broadcast praised Bodman's press conference with state and foreign journalists as a major news story of the day. The broadcast accurately and in full aired Secretary Bodman's introductory remarks to journalists about his meeting with the president, and gave an outlined summary of Bodman's answers to press questions. The following day, state dailies "Neutral Turkmenistan" (Russian, circ. 39,651) and "Turkmenistan" (Turkmen, circ. 29,091) carried articles, with similar content to the "Watan" news broadcast, highlighting the press conference. (COMMENT: "Watan" News program personnel requested a Turkmen language translation of Secretary Bodman's opening remarks from the press conference and carried it accurately as provided, in full. END COMMENT.) The press conference itself seemed to be newsworthy, as the state newspapers used the headline that the "U.S. Energy Secretary answered questions for journalists."

¶6. (U) November 15-16 articles by "Bloomberg," "Reuters," "Agence France Presse," "Global Insight Limited," "Platts Commodity News," "Interfax" and "ITAR-TASS" in English accurately quoted Bodman's remarks from the press conference regarding diversification of energy supplies to Europe and President Berdimuhamedov's intention to consider all possible routes for gas exports, while emphasizing that the Secretary's comment that there was no threat to Russian interests. ITAR-TASS (Russian, English) accurately quoted Secretary Bodman's expression of U.S. opposition to a trans-Iranian route for gas pipelines to Europe because of U.S. concerns about Iran's nuclear program. The outlet did not choose to highlight or over-emphasize this point (NOTE: "BBC", Turkish "TRT" TV channel, among other Turkish news agency stringers participated in the press event. Turkish news agencies had previously ignored most U.S. Embassy press events. END NOTE.)

REMARKABLE ACCESS FOR WESTERN JOURNALISTS, ESPECIALLY BBC

¶7. (SBU) It was a surprise to post (and to other embassies in town) that a BBC TV crew, and correspondents from Bloomberg, Energy Intelligence, Platts Commodity News, and other foreign journalists

were issued visas or otherwise invited to attend the TIOGE conference. In contrast to usual practice, the journalists were not shepherded around by government minders. Several stayed for a few days after TIOGE and for the most part worked independently. Remarkably, the BBC crew filmed around Ashgabat for several days after TIOGE with no problems. Additionally, the Ministry of Oil and Gas escorted the BBC crew on a day trip to the coastal city of Turkmenbashi for visits to oil refineries and other sites. Otherwise, BBC worked independently on a variety of stories.

PDAS MANN'S EFFECTIVE TIOGE PRESS COVERAGE

18. (U) Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, Steven Mann, who arrived in advance of Secretary Bodman held short interviews with an AP local stringer, BBC, and Bloomberg. All three outlets carried accurate and favorable coverage of PDAS Mann and the U.S. role in the TIOGE conference, including BBC World's feature on TIOGE broadcast on its World Business Report program on November 15.

RUSSIAN PRESS -- NEW "GREAT GAME" SPIN

19. (SBU) Many Russian News sources not present in Ashgabat "Vremya Novostey", "Vedomosti", "RIA Novosti", "FC-Novosti", "WPS Russian Media Monitoring Agency" and "RosBusinessConsulting", and ITAR-TASS (present for the Secretary's Press Conference) as well as a handful of western outlets carried accurate coverage of Secretary Bodman's visit to Turkmenistan, but largely drew the conclusion that the visit was an attempt by the United States to weaken Russia's influence or access to energy resources in Central Asia. Many also emphasized American efforts to use a Trans-Caspian pipeline to

ASHGABAT 00001269 003.2 OF 003

bypass Russia.

110. (SBU) COMMENT: State media's approach to Secretary Bodman's visit and TIOGE demonstrated a continued evolution and even decentralization. Even more openly than before Ministry of Culture and state media representatives hounded Embassy media staff for information on Secretary Bodman's schedule and asked for "exclusive" interviews in order to maximize their coverage, in apparent competition with each other. Following Secretary Bodman's meeting with President Berdimuhammedov, a dedicated state TV crew followed Bodman for every subsequent part of his schedule to the extent possible. For the first time in several years, state TV crews, including state TV Channel directors, along with print media representatives joined foreign media representatives for a press conference conducted by the Embassy. The "Turkmenistan" TV Channel crew which missed the Secretary's press conference was loudly and openly criticized by the channel's director in full view of Embassy personnel -- a striking example that the different news outlets are under pressure to start "pulling their own weight."

111. (SBU) COMMENT CONTINUED: The Government of Turkmenistan had a much more relaxed approach to visiting foreign journalists than previously observed. Unlike previous official events attended by foreign journalists, the government made no effort to corral the press or control their movements. The BBC correspondent noted that a government official "asked" her not to film a shoddy looking building, but did not stop her from doing so. In addition, some foreign correspondents were pleased with the number of local citizens who were willing to speak with them, some even "on the record" with use of their full names. All of this is unprecedented for Turkmenistan.
END COMMENT.

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